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Paragons of Piety:  
Spiritual Virgins and their Private Devotion in the  
Northern Netherlands during the Seventeenth Century

Der Beitrag untersucht in wie weit das Geschlecht die Betgewohnheiten einer speziellen Gruppe von Frauen, die sogenannten "geistlichen Mägde" beeinflusste. Die Autorin analysiert die Gebetsanweisungen, die von Ordensgeistlichen und Gemeindegeistlichen geschrieben wurden. Sie versucht festzustellen in wie weit die Privat-Devotion und religiöse Erfahrung von zwei "geistlichen Mägden", die Ego-Dokumente hinterlassen haben, von den damals herrschenden Ideen über Frauen und Weiblichkeit beeinflusst waren.

In the Tridentine Church, prayer was considered a powerful instrument in the process of the appropriation of religion. This process, like the history of religion in general, can only be understood when gender is taken into account as a variable.<sup>1</sup> Gender refers to social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity. During the early modern era, gender functioned as a fundamental aspect of identity on which social structures were partly based. On the one hand, the actual social position of men and women affected the acceptance and adaptation of religion by means of prayer, as did current ideas about the sexes, which were sometimes rooted in biological essentialism. On the other hand, religion and religious teachings contributed significantly to the development of gender differences and gender relations.<sup>2</sup> Therefore gender-specific aspects and dimensions deserve our attention when we analyze prayer books and forms of private devotion in early modern Germany and the Netherlands.

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1 Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction: the Complexity of Symbols", *Gender and Religion: on the Complexity of Symbols*, eds. Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston 1986) 1 – 20. Gisela Bock, "Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate", *Gender and History* 1,1 (1989) 7 – 30, esp. 21. Ursula King offers a methodological frame of reference for including gender in the analysis of religion in her "Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion", *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford UK/Cambridge USA, 1995) 1 – 38.

2 Based on the personal writings of three women, Natalie Zemon Davis elucidates the significance of religion for the development of the (gender) identity of women in the early modern era in her masterly study *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge (Mass.)/London, 1995).

Recently this analytical perspective was used by the Austrian historian Edith Saurer for an exploration of nineteenth-century prayer books for women.<sup>3</sup> She concluded that these books reflect social conventions, expectations and presuppositions regarding the female sex. One such presupposition, and one with a very long history, was that women were by nature more pious than men. Prayer books for women encouraged this supposedly innate religious fervour, but also linked women's private worship with so-called womanly duties and virtues. They strongly emphasized modesty and attempted to instill an awareness of sin in women that was intricately and almost exclusively related to transgressions in the realm of chastity. Such prayer books definitely contributed to what Saurer calls "die Polarisierung der Geschlechtscharaktere", gender polarization. Unlike prayer books of Protestant origin, extant Catholic prayer books compiled in the seventeenth century were hardly ever intended for the members of one sex only.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes parts of them were meant for women or men particularly, but more often gender-specific dimensions and gender-loaded language are not overt in such devotional literature and therefore certainly merit further investigation.

It is not my aim to undertake such an analysis here. Instead, I shall focus on the private devotion of a specific group of religious women, the so-called spiritual virgins, and explore the extent to which gender and gender differentiation influenced their prayer practices. Spiritual virgins were unmarried or widowed Catholic women who led sober, religious lives in the world and applied themselves to all kinds of good works. In Dutch historiography the origin of this way of life used to be attributed to the Reformation. In 1581 Catholic worship was officially prohibited in the provinces of the Northern Netherlands and monastic life came to an end. A number of contemporary obser-

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3 Edith Saurer, "Versprechen und Gebote. Gebetbücher für Frauen, insbesondere im frühen 19. Jahrhundert. Beispiele aus Österreich", *Le livre religieux et ses pratiques: études sur l'histoire du livre religieux en Allemagne et en France à l'époque moderne / Der Umgang mit dem religiösen Buch: Studien zur Geschichte des religiösen Buches in Deutschland und Frankreich in der frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Hans Erich Bödeker, Gerald Chaix, Patrice Veit (Göttingen 1991) 335 – 358. See also Edith Saurer, "'Bewahrerinnen der Zucht und der Sittlichkeit', Gebetbücher für Frauen – Frauen in Gebetbüchern", *L'Homme, Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 1,1 (1990) 37 – 58.

4 Saurer, "Versprechen und Gebote", 347 – 348. See also the article by Ferdinand van Ingen in this volume.



Title page of Schoenius's *Weg der Suyverheyt van d'Hollandse Maegden* (Antwerpen: voor Philippus van Eyck [Amsterdam] 1676), showing spiritual virgins in their characteristic sober dress, immersed in their devotional lecture. University Library Nijmegen

vers considered the spiritual virgins' way of life to be a substitute for the religious life in a convent that was now denied them. Dutch historians Eugenie Theissing and Elisja Schulte van Kessel, however, have already questioned the one-sided correlation between the Reformation and the existence of spiritual virgins,<sup>5</sup> and their views are supported by the autobiographical accounts of two spiritual virgins, Agnes van Heilsbach (1597 – 1640) and Joanna van Randenraedt (1610 – 1684).<sup>6</sup>

Although they lived according to the rules of poverty, obedience and chastity, spiritual virgins were not bound by solemn vows to do so, nor were they forced to live in monastic seclusion, as nuns were. The contemporary characterization of them as representing the “*mid-delen staet*” (“the middle state”) – equivalent to what is nowadays called a semi-religious or quasi-religious existence – aptly expresses their position between the laity on the one hand and the clergy and members of religious orders on the other. Their mode of living was not officially recognized by the Church. In the absence of a general rule for this way of life, edifying books of conduct especially written for spiritual virgins provided some guidance, for the women themselves and probably even more so for their spiritual leaders. The books in question were written by members of the secular and regular clergy and describe the pious requirements the spiritual virgins had to meet. In order to determine the parameters of their devotional culture I analysed four such books, three written by secular priests and one by a Jesuit.<sup>7</sup> The Jesuit, Valentinus Bisschop (1586 – 1636), published the first two volumes of his *Lof der Suyverheydt* (“Praise of Chastity”) in 1625. The third and final volume appeared in 1627 and was explicitly aimed at spiritual virgins.<sup>8</sup> It is one of the earliest and most extensive works written for them. *Clooster van Sion* (“Cloister of Sion”), written by the secular priest Joannes van Heumen (1611 –

5 Eugenie Theissing, *Over klopjes en kwezens* (Utrecht/Nijmegen, 1935); Elisja Schulte van Kessel, *Geest en vlees in godsdienst en wetenschap. Vijf opstellen over gezagsconflicten in de 17de eeuw* ('s-Gravenhage, 1980).

6 Marit Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden. Leven tussen klooster en wereld in Noord-Nederland gedurende de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1996), esp. 280 – 293.

7 In the third chapter of *Geestelijke maagden* I distinguish two types of books for spiritual virgins, *vitae* and works of an unmistakably prescriptive nature. The four selected books belong to the latter kind.

8 *Den Lof der Suyverheydt. Het Derde Boeck, Inhoudende de Gheestelijcke Oeffeningen ende Regel der Maechden* (Antwerpen: Joan. Cnobbaert 1627).

1673), consists of six volumes and appeared between 1663 and 1666.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch translation of *Scala Jacob* ("Jacob's Ladder") by Joannes Lindeborn (1630 – 1696) came out in 1670.<sup>10</sup> Six years later *De Weg der Suyverheyt van d'Hollantse Maegden* ("The Road to Chastity of the Dutch Virgins") was published by Wilhelm Schoenius (died 1684).<sup>11</sup> Of course these clerical authors largely derived their inspiration and source material from the works on virginity written by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

In order to grasp both the meaning and the intention of the written guidelines for spiritual virgins it is necessary first to go into the specific position and significance of these women in the local Church. Subsequently, I will examine some of the directives concerning prayer, and attempt to determine to what extent the prescribed regime of piety reflects gender-related presumptions. Finally, I will turn to the aforementioned ego-documents by Van Heilsbach and Van Randenraedt and try to establish in what ways their private devotion and religious experience were in fact affected by current ideas about women and femininity.

### *Spiritual virgins*

The Council of Trent (1545 – 1563) consolidated the notion that religious women needed to be confined to convents. In Church law, spiritual virgins were considered lay women. Some secular and regular priests maintained, however, that the status of a spiritual virgin was as dignified as that of a member of a religious order. It is certainly true that the combination of pious and pastoral activity appealed to many a devout woman in the seventeenth century. Due to the changes that the Catholic Church in the Northern Netherlands was undergoing, some of those women were able to develop a more active religious lifestyle than the Church approved of for the members of their sex.

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9 *Het Clooster van Sion, leerende een volmaect Geestelijck leven, verdeylt in Ses Deelen* (Antwerpen: voor Hendrick de Bruyn [Rotterdam] 1662 – 1666).

10 *De Leeder Jacobs. De Maegden, die Godt met opzet van eeuwige Reinigheit in de Wereld dienen, toegepast* (Antwerpen: Michiel Cnobbaert voor Joachim van Metelen [Amsterdam] 1670).

11 *De Weg der Suyverheyt van d'Hollantse Maegden* (Antwerpen: voor Philippus van Eyck [Amsterdam] 1676).

The infrastructure of the Church in the Dutch Republic left much to be desired, lacking as it did a system of poor relief, churches and schools. Until about 1640 there was a chronic shortage of priests trained in the spirit of the Council of Trent. Under these circumstances many Catholics became alienated from the Church.

Due to the absence of clerical structures, the Catholic Church had become largely dependent on the laity. Dedicated core members, and among them many of the spiritual virgins, not only supported the Church and the ambulant priests financially, but they also opened up their houses to clandestine services, were engaged in poor relief and the care of the sick, and conducted confirmation classes.<sup>12</sup> Their material and immaterial contributions were of crucial importance to the Church in the process of confessionalization in the early modern era. The lay people's generous gifts and loans, as well as their unflagging zeal in the performance of good works ensured the survival of the Church at a local level. In spite of their change in status – from ordinary lay women to spiritual virgins and thus brides of Christ – the spiritual virgins could still rely upon existing social networks of family and friends. Thanks to this embeddedness in the local community, they could effectively, and often also inconspicuously, act as intermediaries between clergy and laity. Through their clandestine religious teaching they managed to familiarize many Catholics anew with the liturgical and para-liturgical practices of their Church.<sup>13</sup> Thus, they taught children as well as adults, for example, how to say morning and evening prayers, and how to examine their conscience on a daily basis.

Although the activities of spiritual virgins were of vital importance for the survival of the Catholic Church in the Dutch Republic, their significance as intermediaries was by no means limited to the territories in which Protestantism had taken root. Because of their particular attire, which usually consisted of plain, dark clothes with a white collar and a simple form of headgear, the spiritual virgins had an unmistakably religious aura. In a way, they served as living signposts in a missionary Church in which different strategies of “recatholiza-

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12 Mathieu G. Spiertz, “Priest and Layman in a Minority Church: the Roman Catholic Church in the Northern Netherlands 1592 – 1686”, *The Ministry: Clerical and Lay. Studies in Church History*, vol. 26, eds. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Oxford 1989), 287 – 301.

13 Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*, 103 – 107.



The parable of the wise and the foolish virgins (Matthew 25, 1 – 13) was often invoked to describe the relationship a spiritual virgin should maintain with Jesus Christ, her heavenly Bridegroom. Engraving by Hieronymus Wierx in A. Gerardi S.J., *Den Spiegel van Philotea, ende der Godtvruchtighen zielen* (Antwerpen: weduwe van Jan Cnobbaert 1646). University Library Maastricht



tion" were taking shape among the secular and regular clergy. Against this background, the aim of the rules for spiritual virgins is almost self-evident; the clergy were eager to transform every spiritual virgin into a paragon of virtuous piety because she represented an essential link between the Church and the laity. Clearly outlined instructions, often based on monastic rules, structured the entire existence of the spiritual virgin and were meant to ensure its religious character. On the one hand these rules and instructions gave form and substance to the social position of the spiritual virgins and thus made it identifiable for others. On the other hand they were meant to discipline these women, so that they would become models of modesty and religious devotion to be imitated by their fellow Catholics.

*The function of prayer in the daily life of spiritual virgins*

In general devotional literature, as well as in the guidelines for spiritual virgins, prayer was presented as an excellent means of communication between the believer and God. Spiritual virgins were told by the clerical authors that when they were praying, they were actually talking to Christ, their heavenly Bridegroom.<sup>14</sup> The method and intention of the prayers seem to have been focused more on acquiring virtues than on religious experiences, however. The conception of the function of prayer and of the relationship between the person who is praying and God had clearly changed since the later Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> The main purpose of the prescribed practices of private devotion was the sanctification of oneself, and in this respect the guidelines for the spiritual virgins correspond with those that were intended for the laity in general. The guiding principle or "Leitmotiv" in seventeenth-century piety was, of course, the pursuit of salvation. One had to strive

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14 Ibid, 134 – 136.

15 S. Axters O.P., *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden*, 4 vols.; (Antwerp, 1950 – 1960) IV, 287 and F. J. M. Hoppenbrouwers, *Oefening in volmaaktheid. De zeventiende-eeuwse rooms-katholieke spiritualiteit in de Republiek* (Den Haag 1996) 22 – 26. Cf. Theo Clemens, *De godsdienstigheid in de Nederlanden in de spiegel van de katholieke kerkboeken 1680 – 1840*, 2 vols.; (Tilburg 1988) vol. I, 14, who conveys this point as one of the findings of the German church historian A. Schrott S.J., "Das Gebetbuch in der Zeit der katholischen Restauration", *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 61 (1937): 1 – 28 and 211 – 257, esp. 247 – 257.

for one's own sanctification according to one's own position or function in life, and each position entailed specific spiritual obligations. In general devotional literature, for instance, prayer was considered necessary for priests, monks, nuns, and spiritual virgins, but not for the married laity.<sup>16</sup>

Spiritual virgins were supposed to sanctify the day by starting and ending it with prayer.<sup>17</sup> Their evening prayers were in part dedicated to the welfare of parents, family, friends and others for whom they were obliged to pray.<sup>18</sup> Some authors advised them to include the deceased and the souls in purgatory in their prayers.<sup>19</sup> Saying prayers for one's fellow men was seen as a means of self-sanctification rather than as an end in itself, and therefore the prayers for others seem to have been considered of inferior importance to other, more personal points of attention in private devotion. Both Van Heumen and Schoenius recommended spiritual virgins to say the divine office if they could fit it into their schedule of charitable and other works.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to their fellow authors Bisschop and Lindeborn, they emphasized the monastic tradition as an important source of the way of life of spiritual virgins. It was probably for this reason that they advocated that the divine office, the spiritual core of monastic community life, should be incorporated in the pious regime of spiritual virgins as well.<sup>21</sup> Bisschop and Lindeborn did not ignore the monastic tradition,

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16 E.g. Antonius Sucquet S.J., *Den wech des eeuwich levens beschreven int Latijn door ... over-geset door P. Gerardus Zoes...* Door den Aucteur van nieuws oversien en vermeerderd. Met beelden verlicht door Boëtius A. Bolswert (Antwerpen: Hendrick Aertssens, 1623) 58.

17 Schoenius, *Weg*, 260. According to Clemens, *De godsdienstigheid*, 164, the sanctification of the day was the central theme of the Tridentine churchbooks, and that explains why they usually contain morning and evening prayers. Cf. Hoppenbrouwers, *Oefening in volmaaktheid*, 82 – 83.

18 Lindeborn, *Leeder*, 278.

19 Bisschop, *Lof*, III, 525.

20 They were advised to recite the shorter office of the Blessed Virgin Mary (officium parvum Beatae Mariae Virginiae). The translation of this office from the Roman breviary by Friar Minor Arnoldus ab Ischa, entitled *Seven getyden van onse L. Vrouwe ... naer het Roomsche gebruick* (1600), seems to have been popular among spiritual virgins during the seventeenth century. Clemens, *De godsdienstigheid*, vol. I, 44, 68.

21 The divine office was indeed read in one of the few communities of spiritual virgins in the Dutch Republic called De Hoek, at Haarlem. Axters, *Geschiedenis*, vol. IV, 251.

but they were keenly aware of the fact that the majority of the spiritual virgins did not live in communities. Perhaps, in their opinion, the practice of saying the divine office, which was so inextricably bound up with religious community life, was unsuitable for spiritual virgins, who often lived independently and combined prayer with an active apostolate.

Even when their charitable activities or their living conditions did not allow them to say the divine office, spiritual virgins were nevertheless encouraged to pray continuously during the day, at work, at home or in church.<sup>22</sup> They were frequently reminded that without prayer, all piety would remain barren. The clerical authors did not recommend any specific prayer books, however. Being "religious professionals", spiritual virgins perhaps already knew – or were supposed to know – all their prayers by heart.<sup>23</sup> At least one prayer book specifies spiritual virgins as its intended readers: *Het dobbel goddelyk penseken der liefde Godts* (The doubly divine consideration of the love of God), written by an unknown author hiding behind the initials H.V.S.P.O.C.<sup>24</sup> Frequent reprints seem to indicate that the readership must have been larger than the target group of spiritual virgins, which represented less than two percent of the Catholic population in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century.

The clerical authors heavily stressed the importance of the relationship between prayer and the sacraments. Spiritual virgins were encouraged to attend mass on a daily basis and urged to prepare for the use of the sacraments of communion and confession by means of prayer. Because of her exceptional status among the laity, the Jesuit Valentinus Bisschop likened a spiritual virgin to a candle on a candlestick towards which all eyes were turned. Through her intense devotion and reverence for the ceremonies she had to set an example to her fellow Catholics and prove the Catholic faith worthy in the eyes of the Protestants, who spurned the ritual of the mass.<sup>25</sup>

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22 Cf. M. De Vroede, "Kwezels" en "zusters". *De geestelijke dochters in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 17de en 18de eeuw* (Brussel 1994) 200.

23 Perhaps the relatively good condition in which extant church books that once belonged to spiritual virgins have been preserved, is indicative of their rare use. Cf. Clemens, *De godsdienstigheid*, vol. I, 43.

24 Ibid, 72.

25 Bisschop, *Lof*, vol. III, 301; cf. Lindeborn, *Leeder*, 77 – 83.



Kneeling before a house altar, a spiritual virgin turns to her heavenly Bridegroom in prayer. The caption reads: *O Jesus soet mijnen Beminden. Laet mijn ziel u altijd vinden.* (O sweet Jesus, my Beloved/ May my soul find You always.) Probably second half of the eighteenth century. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.

*Prayer and gendered identity*

By praying, a spiritual virgin sanctified each new day and strengthened her piety, but that was not all; prayer also enabled her to confirm her informal religious identity. Some spiritual virgins made a private promise of chastity to their father confessor but, as was mentioned above, the majority was not bound by any vows.<sup>26</sup> It was for this reason that they and their spiritual directors constantly sought ways of affirming the virtuous character of their way of life, and prayer proved to be of instrumental importance in achieving this. Prayer, especially internal or silent prayer, was said to protect chastity, the foundation of the existence of a spiritual virgin.<sup>27</sup> She was, in fact, obliged to pray relentlessly, for prayer would emphasize the spiritual aspects of her identity. Should she fail to meet this obligation, she would not last as a spiritual virgin.<sup>28</sup> By keeping the life and Passion of Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, continuously at the core of her devotion, she could confirm her status as His bride. It was this status that equipped her better for the act of praying than lay persons in general, because God had not distributed the gift of prayer equally among the faithful. Those who had decided to dedicate their entire life to Him were granted more grace because they had shown more true love for Him than others.

In general, however, secular and regular priests doubted whether spiritual virgins could automatically be rated among the elect. Due to the fact that they were women, they were thought by the Jesuit Valentinus Bisschop and others to lack the tenacity necessary for fruitful internal prayer.<sup>29</sup> Perseverance was a quality that was considered masculine during the seventeenth century. Since women were thought by nature to be weaker, more unstable and more foolish than men, Bisschop was convinced that spiritual virgins were more susceptible to what he called the pains and perils of piety.<sup>30</sup> Joannes Lindeborn followed a similar line of argument in his description of the meditative process as an "oration of the mind about godly matters",

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26 Such a private promise of chastity had no legal force in canon law.

27 See especially Schoenius, *Weg*, 100, 261. Van Heumen, *Clooster van Sion* vol. II, 184; Bisschop, *Lof*, vol. III, 246 – 247.

28 Schoenius, *Weg*, 260.

29 Bisschop, *Lof*, vol. III, 266.

30 Ibid, 12 – 13.

which would steer the human will towards the good.<sup>31</sup> Women were thought to be neither intellectually nor morally strong enough for such an undertaking. A woman's religious practice and experience should therefore be closely monitored by priests. Bisschop advised spiritual virgins, for instance, to pay no heed to any revelations, imaginings, or illuminations that might occur when they were praying, without first consulting their confessor and spiritual advisor.<sup>32</sup>

Although authors of devotional books usually warned their audience that any form of prayer should be in keeping with the mental abilities as well as the social situation of those who prayed, their fears regarding the female faithful exceeded their general concern. The clergy sincerely doubted whether women would be able to withstand all sorts of delusions while they were lost in silent prayer. The vicar apostolic Philippus Rovenius (died 1651), for example, condemned the emotions of some spiritual virgins who claimed to have experienced a mystical bond of love with Christ. He felt that they had to refrain from such mysticism, which was devoid of active ascetism, systematic prayer, regular use of the sacraments, and good works.<sup>33</sup> It was probably for this reason that the authors of edifying books for spiritual virgins also advised against contemplation, which was considered the highest form or degree of mental prayer, and for which spiritual perfection was required.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Valentinus Bisschop and his colleagues doubted whether women would be able to root out all their passions and sins and thereby achieve such a degree of perfection.<sup>35</sup> Weak-willed women had better try and strengthen their control over their own human nature by the systematic exercise of virtues. However, it was not only a matter of gender that was involved here. The laity in general were discouraged from engaging in the more elevated forms of prayer. Instead, Church and clergy advocated an ascetic form of piety and insisted that the faithful work at their salvation within the

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31 Lindeborn, *Leeder*, 111 – 126.

32 Bisschop, *Lof*, vol. III, 287.

33 Theissing, *Over klopjes*, 170; Axters, *Geschiedenis*, vol. IV, 252 – 253; Hoppenbrouwers, *Oefening*, 24.

34 E.g. Schoenius, *Weg*, 261.

35 Bisschop, *Lof*, vol. III, 269; Schoenius, *Weg*, 269. Several *vitae* of spiritual virgins published in the seventeenth century stress that, in opposition to the guidelines, the women engaged in oral prayer (“mondgebed”), silent prayer, and contemplation. Two examples will be discussed below.



Portrait of Agnes van Heilsbach, illustrating her “gift of tears.” Her *vita* describes that whenever Agnes started to pray, tears began to flow incessantly from her eyes. Both her eyesight and her reputation were harmed, since quite a number of people were convinced that these tears were the devil’s work. Therefore Agnes pleaded to God to stop the tears, whereupon He changed them into invisible teardrops. Frontispiece in [Daniël Huysmans S.J.], *Leven ende deughden vande weerdighe Agnes van Heilsbagh gheestelycke dochter onder de bestieringhe der Societeyt Iesu* (Antwerpen: Michiel Cnobaert 1691). University Library Nijmegen

context of the Church and the sacraments.<sup>36</sup> The guidelines for spiritual virgins reflect this. As intermediaries between clergy and laity it was not enough for them to become paragons of “ordinary” piety; they had to become paragons of ascetic and sacramental piety.

*Private devotion as reflected in “accounts of conscience”*

One of the intentions with which Agnes van Heilsbach and Joanna van Randenraedt wrote their “accounts of conscience” was to prove that they were in no way deluded by the devil, but really touched by God. Both women lived in Roermond, a town just outside the territory of the Dutch Republic that – institutionally – came under the Southern or Spanish Netherlands. Although there was a constant threat of war and Protestant domination, the Catholic faith could be freely professed here. Both women had Jesuits as their spiritual directors; their confessor was often the rector of the local Jesuit college. They rose to prominence chiefly because of divine revelations that were transmitted to them through dreams, visions and voices. They were instructed by their spiritual counselor to write these extraordinary occurrences down in their accounts of conscience. Their writings allow us some glimpses of the devotional practices of two women who were already considered exceptional during their lifetime.<sup>37</sup>

Agnes and Joanna spent hours praying, in church, before they went to confession and before and after receiving communion. At home, too, in the privacy of their own room, they were often deep in prayer. Through morning and evening prayers they sought to sanctify each day, as was prescribed by the general guidelines. In addition, like nuns who had to rise in the middle of the night to read matins, they, too, were accustomed to interrupt their sleep to say prayers and meditate about the Passion of Christ. It was then, during their silent prayers in the still of the night, that both Agnes and Joanna intensely longed for a spiritual union with their heavenly Bridegroom, a union that would confirm their status as His brides. Often, Christ revealed Himself to them in visions or through voices while they were praying

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36 Hoppenbrouwers, *Oefening*, 22 – 24.

37 Writings by seventeenth-century women about their devotional practices are scarce, as Saurer, “Versprechen und Gebote”, 356, points out. Natalie Zemon Davis highlights the private devotional culture of three women of different persuasions in *Women on the Margins*.



or meditating. This naturally intensified their sense of being united with their Beloved, which made them feel as if they were merged into a greater being. This extraordinary sensation could, in their opinion, only have been brought about by God Himself. Their prayers had contributed but little to their achieving this privileged condition.

Acutely aware of their human and feminine frailty, they prayed to God to grant them strength. The majority of their prayers, however, concerned the salvation of others, and they regarded those prayers as their special assignment. Without being asked to do so, they frequently prayed for their families, their father confessor and their fellow spiritual virgins. The welfare of the Church was of course also included in their prayers, because they were constantly afraid of a possible Protestant domination of Roermond and its surrounding area. They were often asked to pray for particular intentions, and the people requesting their prayers had little doubt about their efficacy. This shows that this particular form of devotion, which was both private and public, had by no means lost its value in the popular devotional culture, and had not been completely replaced by the almost exclusively sacramental piety advocated by the Council of Trent.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Agnes van Heilsbach and Joanna van Randenraedt themselves frequently expressed doubts about the power of their prayers. Such doubts were sometimes encouraged by their confessor, who not only ordered them to pray, but even accused them of laxness when the intention of their prayers remained unfulfilled. At the same time, the doubts they expressed also cast some light on the rhetorical strategies both spiritual virgins employed in their accounts.<sup>39</sup> Writing to order confronted them with different, mutually exclusive demands, and this constituted a double bind. As women, and even more as spiritual virgins, it behooved them to be silent and humble. They could not write about the origin, meaning or truth of their religious experiences without breaking this gendered code of conduct or infringing upon the privilege of interpretation held by their theologically trained confessors and intended readers. By underscoring their humili-

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38 Cf. Kathryn Norberg's claim in, "The Counter Reformation and Women Religious and Lay", *Catholicism in Early Modern History*, ed. John O'Malley S.J. (St. Louis 1988), = *Reformation Guides to Research* II, 133 – 146, esp. 138.

39 Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*, 238 – 278. For the analysis of the rhetorical strategies in the writings of both spiritual virgins I am indebted to Alison Weber's *Teresa of Avila and the rhetoric of femininity* (Princeton (N.J.) 1990).



Portrait of Joanna van Randenraedt that appeared posthumously in her *vita* in 1690. Possibly this engraving by A. le Poutre was made after a painting for which Van Randenraedt reluctantly posed when she was visiting friends in Brussels, a painting that was commissioned by another spiritual virgin

ty and admitting their feminine weakness, they attempted to maintain a certain balance between the demands of their confessor and their personal ambitions. Lamentations about the ineffectiveness of their prayers are in fact closely related to their pastoral ambitions, which pervaded many of the visions, dreams and desires in their accounts, but these ambitions were kept in check on account of their gender.

Agnes's confessor put her in charge of the virgins who were placed under the guidance of the Jesuits at Roermond. Thus she became the spiritual mother of Joanna. She taught Joanna how to say her prayers, for instance, and how to prepare for meditation. There is no evidence in the accounts of conscience of the use of specific prayer books. It would still be interesting to investigate the extent to which their prayer practices were influenced by prayer books or other devotional literature, however, because the Randenraedt family possessed several works by eminent mystical authors like Ruusbroec, Herp, Tauler and Gertrud of Helfta. Agnes refers to the fact that Joanna kept a small notebook with points for special attention for her silent prayer. She may have taken notes from the devotional literature she had at her disposal. In order to establish the influence of late medieval mysticism on her private devotion, it would be necessary to carry out an inter-textual analysis of the works in the Randenraedt library and Joanna's personal accounts of conscience.<sup>40</sup>

Agnes was known to make heavy demands on her spiritual daughters. She disapproved of Joanna's way of meditating, considering it pompous and pretentious. Joanna used to choose two subjects for silent prayer and Agnes was convinced that that would diminish both the "fruit" and the "taste" of her devotion; the reward and the delight that meditation would yield. In Agnes's opinion, Joanna wanted to fly before she even had wings and failed to recognize that in matters of piety she was still as helpless as a child, in need of God's grace. Agnes herself preferred what she called humble and simple religious

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40 Luc. Verschuieren O.F.M., "De boeken eener geestelijk dochter", *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 13 (1939) 185 – 209, made a rudimentary start with such an intertextual analysis. On the basis of Joanna van Randenraedt's writings he concluded that it was doubtful whether she had actually read any of the mystical works her father possessed. In accounts of conscience and a spiritual autobiography that I recently discovered, however, Joanna does make incidental references to her reading of, for example, Herp and the *Evangelische Peerle*. See Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*, 141.

exercises. If God meant her to concentrate on lofty mysteries such as His wisdom or His mercy, He would impress these subjects upon her when she was at her prayers. Before she started praying, she sought the presence of God by mortifying and humiliating herself – she used the mystical expression “vernieten”. The next two steps involved both the mind and the will. In her mind she called up a deep belief in the actual presence of God. Subsequently, she attempted to set her will to love God with tender affection. She described this faith and love as two arms with which she, like a true bride, embraced God at the beginning of her silent prayer. The embrace lasted until the prayer was finished, unless God himself chose to release himself from her “devotional” arms.

When we call to mind the admonitions of the clergy about internal prayer, the accounts of Agnes van Heilsbach and Joanna van Randenraedt seem puzzling. The accounts indicate that both women practiced internal prayer and even contemplation and that, moreover, these activities were recognized and perhaps even encouraged by their confessors, who granted both women some leeway as long as they were able to prove that it was God Himself who allowed them to practice these forms of prayer. The *vitae* of Joanna van Randenraedt and Agnes van Heilsbach published anonymously by the Jesuit Daniël Huysmans (1643 – 1704) in 1690 and 1691 respectively, confirm this.<sup>41</sup> Huysmans based the two substantial volumes on the personal accounts of both virgins and he clearly distinguished between oral prayer (“gebedt” or “mondelijken gebedekens”), silent prayer (“bedenckinghe”) and contemplation (“beschouwinghe”). Shortly after her death, the writings of Agnes van Heilsbach attained a wide readership among spiritual virgins in the Southern Netherlands. These women were truly inspired by the images and conceptions of God that Agnes had carefully expounded in her accounts, and they used them fruitfully in their own private devotions.<sup>42</sup> Agnes's writings were used as

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41 *Kort Begryp des levens ende der deughden van de weerdighe Joanna van Randenraedt geestelycke dochter onder de Bestieringhe der Societeyt Iesu* (Antwerpen: Augustinus Graet 1690) and *Leven ende Deughden vande weerdighe Agnes van Heilsbagh gheestelycke dochter onder de bestieringhe der Societeyt Iesu* (Antwerpen: Michiel Cnobbaert 1691).

42 I am currently investigating the transmission of specific images and conceptions of God through accounts of conscience within informal networks of spiritual virgins as well as of (regular) priests.

prayer books, so to speak. It may have been for this reason that her accounts were closely scrutinized by the Jesuits. One of her former confessors, Jacob Wijns (1593 – 1649), denounced what she had written as “women's fantasies” (“vrauwe fantasien”).<sup>43</sup> This denunciation is the reflection in a nutshell of the gap between the unequivocally sacramental piety generally supported by the clergy, and the more mystically oriented private devotion of religious women like Agnes van Heilsbach and Joanna van Randenraedt.

### *Conclusion*

The guidelines for spiritual virgins clearly express the importance of prayer in their prescribed regime of piety. Prayer would enable them to affirm their specific “spiritual” identity as well as their intermediary status between the clergy and the laity. Personal sanctification should increasingly become the main motive for praying. Meanwhile, however, many of Agnes van Heilsbach's and Joanna van Randenraedt's prayers were intended for and requested by others, which indicates that personal and public interests could in fact still be merged in prayer. The fact that both women were afraid that their supplications might not be very effective may indicate that the importance of this form of intercession on behalf of others was declining. If we consider the structure of their writings, however, it seems more likely that their self-deprecatory remarks should be interpreted as *topoi*, rhetorical strategies aimed at securing the goodwill of their confessor and his benevolent cooperation in including more pastoral elements in their personal regime of piety.

Being considered intermediaries between clergy and laity, the spiritual virgins were instructed to interiorize and propagate sacramental and ascetic forms of piety. These instructions reflected theological tendencies in the Tridentine Church as well as prevailing presuppositions about women. Because of their gender, spiritual virgins were thought to lack the intellectual and moral qualities required for internal prayer and contemplation. The spiritual ego-documents of Agnes van Heilsbach and Joanna van Randenraedt indicate that neither their religious energy nor their private devotional practices were easily channeled along the lines set out by the clergy.

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43 Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*, 260 – 265.